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ABSTRACT

The people of Kerala are among the most politically conscious and active in India. A number of educational reforms have occurred through political action. Three of the most notable of these reforms are: (1) The Private Secondary School Scheme of 1955; (2) the Kerala Education Act of 1958 and the Kerala Education Rules of 1959; and (3) the current and ongoing student political activism. A brief historical overview of education in Kerala is provided and serves as context for the discussion of the reforms. (DB)

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EDUCATIONAL REFORMS THROUGH POLITICAL ACTION: THE CASE OF KERALA, INDIA

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Introduction

People of Kerala can be considered one of the most politically conscious and active in India. " Politics" is one of the most widely discussed topics for all sections of the community. Political actions in the form of demonstrations and marches with the chanting of political slogans can be found everywhere as a matter of everyday occurrences. This high degree of political consciousness and activism to achieve political rights might be attributable to the high level of literacy as well as to the availability of newspapers. There are more than 40 newspapers published in the state and almost everyone from the riceworker to university professor reads a newspaper as first thing in the morning. Newspapers in Kerala keep people informed of issues that affect them as well as serve as a forum for political discussions

Because of the high degree of political consciousness and active involvement in politics, Kerala has been very successful in bringing about educational reforms through political action. By political action I mean those actions taken by people through a high degree of involvement in political parties as well as through public discussions, debates and demonstrations to deal with the issues of important concern.

I shall discuss three of the notable reforms in education that were brought about through political action. These are: 1. the Private Secondary School (PSS) scheme of 1955; 2. the Kerala Education Act of 1958 and the Kerala Education Rules of 1959; and 3. the current and ongoing student political activism. A brief historical overview of education will be gone into, to provide a context for this discussion.

Historical Perspectives

Kerala was known to the ancient world during the 1st to 4th centuries. Demand for pepper and other spices stimulated trade between southwest India and distant lands. The early contacts made Kerala very cosmopolitan in its make up. After the arrival of Christian missionaries, many schools were established. This is attributable to the importance that Christian missionaries, especially catholics placed on education. The Christian community of Kerala which is known to have existed in Kerala since 52 A.D., can be said to be a major factor in the establishment of numerous schools in the state. For instance, after the arrival of Portuguese missionaries in the 1600s, many schools were established. Christians as a group received more education than any other groups. The British who colonized India in the 1800s were also instrumental to establishing more schools, especially English schools in Kerala.

In the educational system of Kerala, the emergence of two types of schools, the English and native Malayalam schools is noticeable after the enactment of the Minute of McCauley in 1835 The Malayalam schools consisted of nine years. In these schools the learning of the English language was also provided from the 5th till the 9th year. The English schools began after 4 years of primary school. The first year of the middle school was known as preparatory class. This was followed by 1st Form, 2nd Form and 3rd Form. High school stage began with the 4th Form and ended with the 6th Form. The medium of instruction in both the middle and high schools was English. At the end of the 6th Form a public examination was administered. Those who passed the examination were given the ESLC or English School Leaving Certificate. In 1948, one year after India gained independence from the British the medium of instruction was switched to Malayalam. Subsequently, in 1950 the ESLC was abolished and was replaced by SSLC or Secondary School Leaving Certificate. At present the educational system of Kerala follows a system of

10 year school (5+3+2). This is followed by additional 2 years known as the higher secondary or predegree program. Kerala today has more private, mostly Christian schools than public schools, reflecting the influence of the Christian community.

The PSS scheme of 1955

Christian communities in Kerala, no doubt, have played a significant role in establishing schools. However, there were many administrative problems. The managers of private schools received a lump sum grant from the state government. They often did what they pleased with the money. Many teachers in the private schools were not paid adequate salaries. The teachers of private schools were often exploited by their managers. Discontent with this state of affairs, the teachers of private schools formed an organization known as the Private School Teachers Association. This organization was so successful in influencing politicians that a Bill was introduced in the Legislative Assembly of Kerala known as the Private Secondary Scheme (PSS). The bill was passed in 1955. The Chief Minister of Kerala at that time was Panampalli Govinda Menon, who was sympathetic to the teachers of private schools. According to the PSS scheme, the salaries of the private school teachers were directly paid to them from the government. This reform, therefore, has been considered a very important one since it ended the injustices that prevailed in the private schools.

Kerala Education Act and Education Rules

When the first communist government came to power, very significant and comprehensive reforms were brought about. The Kerala Education Act of 1957 and the Kerala Education Rules of 1958 are considered to be two of the landmark reforms that were passed by the Legislative Assembly of the government of Kerala. The Chief Minister of Kerala at that time, EMS Namboodiripad and the Education

Minister professor Joseph Mundassery, a well-known scholar in literary criticism played important roles in drafting the Kerala Education Act as well as the Kerala Education Rules. The Kerala Education Rules provided rules and procedures concerning every aspect of educational administration. These two documents brought about uniformity and systematization in the educational administration in the schools of Kerala.

Although the sweeping reforms carried out by the first communist government was a catalyst for its ouster, the reforms brought about by the Kerala Education Act and Education Rules have been extremely beneficial in bringing about important changes in education. Although the Kerala Education Act and Rules were objected by private school managers, the documents made important concessions to managers of private schools as well as to teachers of private schools. For instance, the managers retained the power to appoint teachers in their schools. The teachers of private schools received the same guarantees of job security and other benefits that were provided to the teachers of government schools.

The Kerala Education Act in many respects has been the forerunner of Kerala Education Rules. This document in a sense laid the foundations for the subsequent Kerala Education Rules. The document which has three parts, deals with issues such as the establishment and recognition of schools, duties of the managers of schools, appointment of teachers, and the disciplinary powers of government over aided schools, and the question of compulsory education.

The Kerala Education Rules (KER) which has 31 chapters provided very detailed treatment of issues outlined in Kerala Education Act. It deals with every aspect of educational administration including the establishment and maintenance of schools, attendance, holidays, discipline, conduct of teachers, salaries and benefits of teachers, inspection of schools and so on. The KER has been used as a guiding norm in making court decisions on cases brought up that relate to education. There

is a body of case law based on the court decision. It brought about uniformity and standardization in school administration. KER in many ways can be said to contribute towards equity and efficiency in Kerala's educational system. It is hailed as the Magna Carta of education in Kerala and is considered an important landmark in the educational reforms in Kerala.

Student Political Activism and Reforms

Student political activism is alive and well in Kerala. They play an important role in the educational reforms in Kerala. In many ways the Kerala schools mirror some of the unique characteristics of the society in Kerala. The political consciousness and activism so characteristic of the people of Kerala are reflected through the schools in Kerala. The student activism can be evidenced in the colleges as well as in the secondary schools. The interesting aspect of student political activism in Kerala is that it carries clout in the sense that the students have real power. The student organizations that exist in the colleges and secondary schools of Kerala are affiliated with the political parties in the state.

In addition to providing them with experience in political arena, the student activism also has been instrumental to bringing about reforms in education. In a number of cases the students through their political activism have been very successful in effecting changes and needed reforms in education. For instance, the students made a number of demands as part of their agenda in 1988. One of their demands was to receive textbooks as soon as the school is open. This issue stemmed from the fact that the textbooks were published exclusively by the government and often did not arrive until three or four months after the school is open. Another demand was to lower the prices of books. A third demand was to make college education free for all. Fourth demand was to make travel more convenient for students by the provision of additional buses for students who commute to school as

well as to provide them with special travel concessions. Another important issue was to have the tests conducted on time and have the results published without long delays. The student agitations to achieve these demands have been very successful. All of the demands except the issue of free college education were met by the state government. It is interesting to note that it is the student unions affiliated with the opposition parties that take leading role in calling for reforms and engage in various types of political activism.

Conclusion

Kerala has been very successful in bringing about educational reforms have been brought about by various types political actions. Because the people of Kerala have a very high rate of literacy and because political activism is a normal feature of life in Kerala, it hardly surprising that reforms take place through political actions. There are certain merits in this type reform in that the issues are brought up before the public. There is a high degree of involvement and public discussions become an important part of this type of reforms.

The early introduction of political activism that are to be found in the schools as part of political education help create the kind of climate in which everyone knows how to be involved and become politically active in order to achieve certain desired goals. Unlike the Western societies, in particular the United States, the students in the secondary schools of Kerala experience a sense of real power as opposed to a simulation of it in the context of political socialization in the U.S. schools.